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If a generation gap does exist, the English teacher has failed in his primary task--improving personal communication--and must accept full responsibility for this failure. A profile of the typical North Carolina English teacher reveals a person over 30 years of age who is politically and morally influenced by the values of previous generations; inadequately informed about modern music, books, and movies; and complacent in a segregated school. On the other hand, many of the students with whom the teacher must cope are impatient with the machine-like qualities of adults: their cliches, platitudes, apathy, petty dishonesty, and naivete. Significantly for the schools, these students despise the English teacher who merely follows the curriculum imposed by the state and claims that he hasn't the time, money, training, or authority to do otherwise. In reality, he possesses untapped power, ranging from public relations to strikes, and has easy access to instructional materials from many sources. Teachers must soon decide that they, not state officials, parents, or students, are the leaders in education. (JS)

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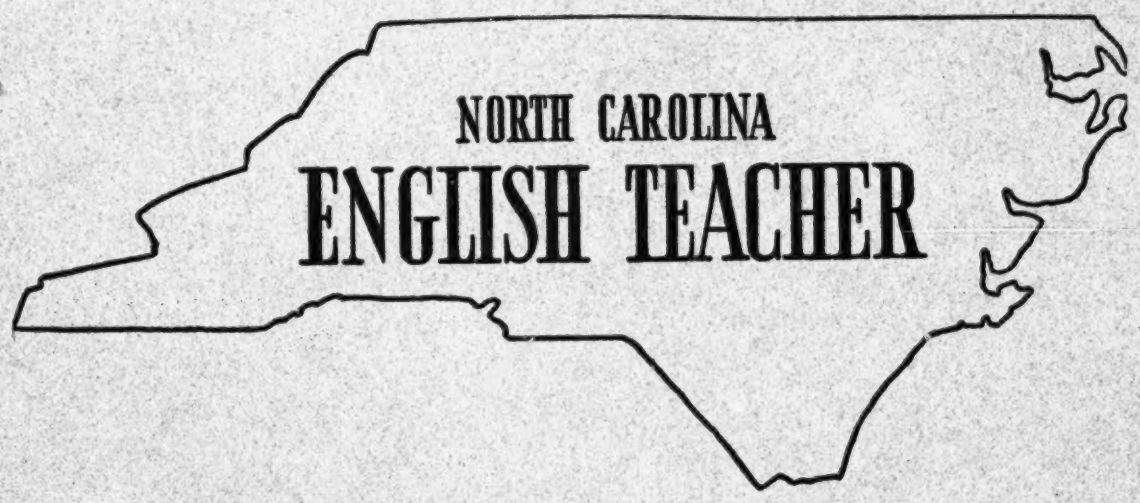

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State, Student, And Teacher: Where Is The Leader?

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Several years ago students had a joke in which they would point to someone and say, "ZAP!" The someone zapped was supposed to be dead, sterilized, paralyzed or in some equally

helpless condition. Today, without the same sense of jest and in a more roundabout way, students play this game with adults. They look at you and say, "GAP!" That means they have sent you to another world. They no longer see or hear you.

Adults, and especially teachers, cry, "Unfair!" Adults think the gap is a fabrication kids have built to excuse themselves from the traditional rules of courtesy and social behavior. They think that in this "permissive" age kids are lazy and have invented the generation gap as a way of excusing themselves from an "earn your own way" society. Parents disbelieve the gap because its existence would indict them as parents. Teachers disbelieve the gap because it would mean they cannot do what every good teacher must do—know the students. And of course that cumulative entity of adults, the State, does not believe in the gap because if the gap exists, the State as we know it will be consumed by the young who are more plentiful on their side of the gap than adults on the other side.

And the English teacher? If the gap exists, the English teacher has failed in his primary job—not grammar, spelling, business letters, but personal communication. The desire and ability to communicate personally comes before any other language skill. All other English teaching is frivolous without it.

Well, that gap talk, that's just nonsense, isn't it? Sure it is, just like the talk about a racial gap. We all knew Negroes really liked White society, didn't we? We knew it just as we know now that the kids are just "going through a phase" on their way to joining the rest of us. Ladies and gentelmen, there is a gap, and it is more certain and concrete than the Santa Claus you created for nice little Virginia. Let's go on a guided tour of your edge of the gap, your edge as teachers. First I'll ask the question the kids ask (by word or deed), "Who the hell are you? (If you deny their right to ask and receive an answer, then you have just demonstrated the gap, and you ought to be rapped on the knuckles and sent back thirty or forty year-steps to the square marked High School and lose one turn.)

PERSONAL: Either you are over thirty, or you act over thirty. You are not rich, but you make a low or medium middle-class salary. You live in a segregated neighborhood though you have never been a segregationist. At 18 you had never had sexual intercourse, you followed your parents' political views, you had never had a drink outside your parents' supervision. Today you either did not see or were shocked or saddened by

the movie "The Graduate." (Maybe you believe those people only exist in New York and California.) In music you do not like hard rock because it is too loud, and you do not really like the Beatles.

SOCIAL: You don't like to express yourself passionately and physically when you dance. You drink in public but you would never consider pot because you condemn it without knowing anything beyond what you have read in a few brief articles. And you don't know anyone who has tried pot. In speaking and socializing of all kinds you value a pleasant atmosphere above complete honesty.

EDUCATIONAL: You do teach or have usually taught in a segregated school, and you have never been too happy or too worried about it. As an English teacher you know you lack some very important training. You should read more. You are not too familiar with or cannot stomach modern writers like Nat Hentoff, Norman Mailer, Bruce Jay Friedman, John Barth, Claude Brown, Herbert Gold, James Baldwin, and Gore Vidal. You do not know what the "new journalism" is. You are secretive when and if you look at Playboy. Other magazines with sexy covers you will not browse in, and certainly you do not linger in a store with any quantity of these.

You believe you are open-minded overall, but you seldom if ever read anything but solid predictably moderate magazines like *Life, Look, Time, Newsweek* and *Saturday Evening Post.* In fact if you had to choose any one word to describe your position on important controversies, you would call yourself a moderate.

That description will not apply 100% to any one person, I hope, I hope, I hope. Obviously I pity the "moderate" I have described, but I know many of you will defend him. The point is not to immediately evaluate or judge but to keep your mind open. Does the description cover many English teachers? That is the only important question right now. I think it does. Many students would think so too.

So, now, what are the students like? First let me say we are not concerned with the invisible student, the one who causes no trouble, always says yes sir and no sir, gets moderately good grades and joins the usual clubs. He is not "where the action is." He is not indicative of the problems and crises in education and society (though as an adult he may later cause crises). Plenty of students pass quietly from pre-puberty to middle age.

I have described them in describing the English teacher. What changing America will need in coming years are thinkers and leaders whose ideas are creative so new thought can meet new problems. The alternative is a society that meets problems like the recorded voice of the telephone company.

In my description of teachers I have already indicated some ways in which genuinely young students differ from adults. So here let one of them speak for themselves—something they do nicely if adults have the courtesy and interest to listen. They are certainly less boring than many people who speak at teachers' meetings.

Dear Mr. Kaufman,

I feel as if a year's worth of activity and experiences have been packed into the last three weeks. It will take me half the summer to calm down. I wish I could go into the woods, by the beach, some place all by myself for a few days so I could straighten everything out in my mind. I can't though. The whole time I kept wanting to write to you and tell you what was happening. Anyway the letter couldn't come til now; it may not be too coherent.

I had a class in Jewish philosophy at my temple once a week. It was more of a discussion period. About three weeks ago, we started out talking about civil rights, about the black militancy, etc. The discussion got very heated, when my teacher (he's about 40, very intelligent man and likeable) started saying that the attitude of white America toward the black society should be one of benevolence. We should say to the Negroes, "look, I'm sorry for what we did to you for 200 years, but we're trying our best, just have patience, accept what we're generously giving you and shut up." At that point Ellen and I started saying that behind all the black power jargon, all the black community is looking for is recognition as human beings—as equals. That this demand they're making is so basic that we, as whites don't even have to decide whether or not to oblige—it's like saying to someone, "Okay, you can breathe." Then, two girls in the class, my own age, began screaming that before a Negro can demand to be treated as a man he must prove himself a man. When I asked if her father had had to prove his manhood to his society, she said that he did—he proved himself by getting a job and earning enough money to support his family in S_____. I still can't believe she said that. And everyone else in the class agreed with her, except for Ellie and me. It's about the

scariest thing I've ever heard. At that point, I began to see why so many people have been calling for a revolution. Before I thought they were absurd. But obviously, something is rotten at the very basis of our society—something that legislation will never get to. The worst part was that I could not even talk to this girl any more. Because as basic as the belief that all men are men is basic to me, this is how strongly she is committed to the American dollar. I think this session marked the end of my innocence and naivete. It changed me so much. I can't tell you what it was like to hear that from another person. I was so sheltered. Then Kennedy was murdered. The following day at school was like a nightmare. In all of my classes except two, absolutely nothing was said. The day progressed as if nothing had happened. How long can the machine keep on grinding? My only question is what will it take to stop it? How long can the facade of health, or normalcy be kept up? I talked about this a lot with my Cit. Ed. teacher. Maybe I'm being unfair in thinking that the machine should stop. It just seems to me that if any people, if any emotion was left in the system, some notice would have been made of the death. There was nothing at all.

I told you about our Vietnam paper project. We almost got three ulcers each over this stupid thing, but we finished the paper and last week, thirteen kids and three teachers trooped down to Washington to present our paper.

We were supposed to present it to representatives, senators, State Dept. officials, etc. Our principal had delusions of grandeur.

We had the scariest meeting in the State Department. The building is the grossest structure in the world. It absolutely reeks of white paint and stainless sterile steel. The man who received us was a robot. First, he told us the importance of being "brief and relevant." He then proceeded to give us a half hour of the most Catch 22 propaganda, 100% administration talk I have ever heard. He had no mind, I swear. He told us how Hanoi filters news, but of course we don't. He told us how news media distort, how much destruction takes place in Vietnam, that actually the buildings are "concrete reinforced" so they only look destroyed when they really are not. When I asked if people can become concrete reinforced too, he laughed. He couldn't answer any questions about Laos, only Vietnam. Laos "wasn't his bag." And people like him, and people prob-

ably worse than him are running this country. We encountered another robot with similar programming at the White House. This guy told us how emotionally satisfying World War II and how the whole country was mobilized against the ENEMY and how it was so great. This war, there's no clearly defined enemy, so it's not as satisfying and thus not as popular. And you should have seen him smile as he spoke of the emotional satisfaction of war.

We also got to Arlington. We went to Kennedys' graves. We heard people complaining because they did not have color film to take a picture of the flowers. I guess that is none of my business. I can't tell you how I felt. We went to the tomb of the Unknown Soldier. It was horrible. The honor guards are not even alive—they're machines. How could a human let himself be programmed like that? What a tribute! The worst part was walking out—at the bottom of the hill are all the gravestones which are all the same, stretching for miles in perfectly straight rows. We saw a woman looking for a grave. Only she could not find it. She had to keep looking at the numbers on the back of the tombs to find the right one. It took her ten minutes.

Besides being gross and shocking, the trip was great. Everyone who went was very friendly, and very open. For two days we were together—all we did was talk and laugh. It was impossible readjusting to school when we returned. I constantly thought about the trip, and I kept wanting to find someone who had gone to talk to. We were all so close, and it was depressing as hell to be estranged again in school. I got to know Mr. B_____ very well too, and love him. He is going to Europe this summer and may not come back. I hope he does. He is young and as screwed up as all of us, and it is great talking to him and knowing him.

Today was the last day of school and it was very hurried and left me very empty. Everyone scurried around, cried over their marks, and went home. I won't even see half of my friends over the summer. Yesterday we went into the city and went into the cathedral. It's big and always cool. Whenever I walk in I feel myself being emptied, and thus somehow I am holy. I could only pray for my friends. The trip made me realize how much other people affect me—how I depend on them. We also had to say good-bye to Mr. B_____ today. We just joked around because everyone was too afraid to admit what he really felt.

Only one poem has come out of my hysteria of the past weeks. It sounds best read aloud.

Standing firm in streaked sunshine
the air beckoned and swayed from the opposite bank
Alas! immobile in the thick of current
only to watch feverish morning hang heavy on
    naked shoulders,
    brown
midstream, in crossing, behold your eyes—a wilderness
a quavering finger, the river tremored
seconds shattered and froze
ah—but to soar into scented sleep
ascending in a freezing gust of Arctic air.

Which is probably why I like hearing about your farm. I can only send you letters about Concern, Involvement, Confusion.

It seems now that there is no more time to be cynical, sarcastic or merely critical and disgusted at what is going on. No bitterness. Now, to cope with the realities, what you need is confidence, love, faith in friends, in people. When I realized this, I realized I should reconsider going into teaching. I'd have to be a good teacher, or else I'd quit. I want to do as much for some people as my teachers have done for me.

Hellos from everyone. Keep happy.

Love,
R------

This girl is not typical of the student's plight. She is much more optimistic, less cynical. She is still a long way from "copping out." But she is typical of the sensibility of many students. What disturbs her most about her teachers and government officials is their automatic and too familiar responses to problems in terms of ready-made and impersonal cliches. If she ever accepts the generation gap as unbridgeable, it will be because she feels adults are as unreachable as machines. Faced with this problem she might do as many students do and quote a line from the movie "Cool Hand Luke." Luke has been in constant conflict with his prison officials and guards. Just before he dies he says, "What we have here is a failure to communicate."

Whose failure is it in our school system? This girl in a simple friendly letter has communicated her situation better than most adults do in any situation.

She speaks well of at least some of her teachers, but she is

in one of the country's very best schools. Teachers with a bachelor's degree start at better than $6,000, and almost all have a master's degree. Many have doctorates. English teachers teach only four classes, no more than 100 students, and they have at least two free periods a day plus lunch. Every seventh year the teacher has a paid sabbatical. The school has a large library complete with film strips and records. These conditions do not exist in North Carolina. In most schools English teachers simply cannot be good teachers. In fact their willingnes to be poor teachers probably helps to alienate their students. They do not have this girl's courage to say, "I'd have to be a good teacher, or else I'd quit."

What would happen to this girl in your school? And think about the fact that most of her contemporaries have led a less sheltered life, are more plagued with doubts, are more readily cynical, have had greater freedom from the imposition of parental values. If you want to study the gap in slow motion another way, study the songs printed on the Beatles' "Sergeant Pepper" album jacket, especially "A Day in the Life," "She's Leaving Home" and "When I'm Sixty-four."

The problem is not simply that kids dislike the cliches, but that they are beginning to see that the older generation has papered their cracked and shabby lives with the sacred words love, faith, dignity, patriotism, honesty, courage and individualism. The kids object to hypocrisy, the credibility gap that goes all the way from the former school teacher Lyndon Johnson to parents who condone "white lies" and who for lack of word power or interest often give "Because I said so" as the solution to an argument.

High school students still live in a concrete world of people, places, things and actions. They have not yet substituted abstract thinking for doing. They have not yet begun to accept a nice label in place of a shabby thing. And they object to a world of adults who use abstraction to cover up disinterest or lack of real understanding. In politics and education they hear phrases like "individual rights" and "law and order," yet students have few inalienable rights, and all kids know their parents, teachers and state officials freely break or flout the laws (as with income tax laws and traffic laws) or interpret them to suit their own purposes. Southern school boards and even some NCEA chapters deliberately try to dodge the law of the land on racial equality. The student may actually favor this dodging, but he is still learning to disrespect law and authority.

One may argue that students are not really bothered by their elders' impurities. Yet if honesty and concreteness and real courage (however misguided some might think) were not major concerns of today's students, why did they flock to Robert Kennedy and Eugene McCarthy?

Most important in this day when we emphasize principles of equality, the student is discriminated against. As one California teacher put it, *all* students are "Niggers." They have separate dining and toilet facilities and separate school rules. They are talked to in special kinds of voices. They have little legal right to challenge school authority. Worst of all they are not thought of or treated as people. They are ordered into the army where they might die for something neither their parents nor their government has really cared to explain. Nor is the young man allowed to choose the government for which he must risk his life. So he is little more than an instrument, just as in school he is a number or a seat or a per pupil expenditure to be moved from square to square in an academic Monopoly game. By the time students get to college one of their most common complaints is anonymity. A key word among students now is "Don't blow your cool." In other words, there is not much that is worth getting excited about or involved with, don't be conned. Keeping your cool is basically a cynical mistrust of the oustide world, and it is not something kids invented in their own nightmares.

Of course students and teachers are not identical. But today's students should not be treated like the teen-ager the teacher was at a comparable age. By television, books, transportation, film, newspapers, telephone, radio, satelite and modern affluence today's eighteen-year-old has lived with the violence of riot and war, the sensuality of adult sex, the new insights of drugs, the intricacies of national politics, and the different points of view of non-western cultures. In many instances students have learned more from their active and varied lives and from mass media than they have learned from school. They may be even more sophisticated and knowledgeable than the moderate, middle-class teacher.

With a gap so wide, no wonder the student demands at least to be heard. No wonder he despises the parent, teacher or state educator who simply expects him to "come around" and imitate today's adults. For instance, what is the adult's view of English? Introduced to an English teacher he says, "Oh, I'll have to watch my grammar." Isn't it a little naive to meet the students' need

for expression with a semester of grammar drills? The student knows instinctively what all the research has shown: teaching grammar produces no effect on the student's ability to write or speak well. To teach grammar in blind obedience to a syllabus and in the face of the students' real needs is insulting to the students. It is unethical if you believe English has any real importance in the modern world.

The teacher's excuse is usually that he does not have the time, money, training or authority to teach the kind of English course that would be relevant to the students' search for meaning. Sometimes the teacher simply says it cannot be done, that English classes are not to be concerned with this kind of problem. Maybe so, but the problem of communication as the student sees it is basically a language problem. Look at the great variety of linguistic devices students have developed to express themselves. Their slang or their psychedelic jargon are their attempts to create precise expressions for their discoveries and sense of place.

The fact that the teacher cannot cope with the real problems in English is ultimately the teacher's fault. As a "professional" the teacher knows what he needs to do his job. He knows enormous changes are needed in working conditions, educational plants, curriculum, teacher training, scheduling of work loads, student guidance and textbook selection. What other professional would have the questionable ethics to carry on knowing he could have an adequate environment but has not? Would a doctor take out an appendix with a pen knife if he knew in advance that the hospital had not bothered to provide scalpels? And isn't a student's mind more important than his appendix?

Teachers know their duties best and they are the ones who should be responsible for getting what they and their students need. They could get these things. They have all kinds of means from public relations to strike, none of which they have ever used in an organized or forcefully directed manner. If English teachers are as imaginative and motivated as teachers ought to be, they can find the right means to achieve their goals. This process should have begun in earnest several years ago. Teachers must now catch up. Within the next two years they will be faced with the double problem of remedying the inequities of segregated school systems and modernizing their English courses in general.

This year English teachers will see the creation of a statewide curriculum. Over-burdened though they are and way below minimum standards, they will probably accept the curriculum passively and without knowing what its implications are for themselves or their students.

They will pass the curriculum material on to their students with platitudes like, "You have got to do this because the State says so." Is that any reason to give a boy or girl whom you also tell to "think for yourself?"

Teachers are not thinking either. Too placidly they have listened to nothing but pleasantries, platitudes, and abstractions in discussions of new ideas in education and the new English curriculum. They have received no solid, research-documented reasons for new programs. They have been told that the public has more say in the content of education than do the teachers and that formal grammar must be taught not because there is reason to believe it helps students, but that the public would be shocked if grammar were not taught. The State's approach so far is to treat symptoms rather than causes, to provide a finishing school "acquaintance" with literature and a public relations man's correctness with grammar. This seems nothing more than an attempt to cover a problem instead of curing it. Meanwhile, while all this is going on, *nothing is being done about the conditions which keep the teacher from teaching anything very well.* The results are clear in the statistics about North Carolina education.

The student suffers, and the teacher lets him suffer. Sooner or later, in many ways, the student begins to sense that the teachers and the State are living on the other side of the great gap and that the teacher is too chicken to begin building a bridge. The bridge can be built. Individually teachers may not be able to do it, but the knowledge exists, the specialists exist.

The ways toward a solution are too many to enumerate. Their existence can be verified by even a cursory look at the publications of NCTE, the U. S. Office of Education, Conference on College Composition and Communication and independent curriculum development organizations. From time to time national magazines and newspapers publish fine articles on problems relevant to English teaching. In many different kinds of publications writers themselves have given us valuable ideas about language and learning. And in recent issues of the *North Carolina English Teacher* Baird Shuman, Sterling Hennis and Genella

Allison have offered creative and specific suggestions for improving English teaching. Teachers ought to know this literature and agressively back the ideas in it rather than accept whatever they get from the head office. The North Carolina English Teachers Association ought to have a conference in which researchers and educators can discuss the new curriculum and the State's priorities which place such a curriculum above the more basic needs of improved working conditions.

Our governments—local, state and federal—all ring with praise and faith in education. The phrase "Young people are the key to the future," flies like a flag in civic speeches and commencement addresses. The teacher must demand that government make this pleasant abstraction into something present and functioning. Isn't that phrase really a subtle promise? Hasn't that promise been made too long without action? *We do not have plenty of time.*

Teachers must decide if they are leaders or servants. The government by word has dubbed them leaders and it has dubbed students heirs apparent. But in act the State treats teachers as servants of the lowest order and students as necessary savages. If teachers are to bridge the generation gap, they must change themselves. They cannot lead students unless they lead their own profession. In the present vacuum of leadership students are trying to lead both teachers and State. They still believe in the order of leaders and followers.

So far students are more successful at leading other students than teachers are. Ultimately their leadership will collapse, perhaps into anarchy. Many of them will continue to follow their present adult leaders. If this latter group prevails we will have something in the nature of sheep leading sheep. Then we will either wander over the cliff of the gap in the dark or we will truly become a nation of sheep.